PENNSTATE

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8–May–2006

Robert Pangborn
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Dr. Pangborn,

I hope all is well in the Office of Undergraduate Education, and thank you for scheduling time to meet with me regarding the Penn State Wiki proposal. The overall proposal paints broad strokes in defining how wiki technology can be useful at Penn State; I look forward to productive conversation with your office focusing on one aspect of the proposal: student–based course descriptions.

In three letters submitted to the Office of University Relations and Division of Student Affairs, I defend wiki technology as a means to improve overall University communications. The letters outline faculty and student benefits, editing fundamentals, online legal protections, information quality and reliability, and promotion of free speech in an online setting. The purpose of this letter is to provide appropriate background to facilitate our 9–May–2006 meeting.

While University Relations and Student Affairs object to University–sponsored public wikis on the grounds that it creates a "risk of false information going out to too many people before it can be corrected," in addition to the University having a "certain respect for fact checking and the truth" and "responsibility to maintaining accurate information,"[1] I posit that the rational lacks merit in light of individuals being able to judge for themselves what information is trustworthy on a wiki. I acknowledge the University's responsibility to maintain accurate information on official Web pages, however, the University policy entitled "Copyright Information"[2] reads as follows (emphasis added):

[1] Battle, Catherine. "Penn State decides against supporting wiki project." *The Daily Collegian*, 10–February–2006

[2] Copyright Information: http://www.psu.edu/ur/copyright.html

> The information presented on Penn State's Web site comes from a variety of sources, including not only official Penn State departments and colleges, but also unofficial sources and individuals. Although every effort is made to present current and accurate information, **the University does not author or edit all of the pages presented here and therefore cannot assume responsibility for all information.** The author of each Web page is responsible for the content of that page and is expected to abide by University policies and local, state, and federal laws.

The Penn State Wiki was never proposed as a source of official information, and the University already hosts non–official content that is highly circulated yet occasionally incorrect (*e.g.,* The Daily Collegian).

Additionally, higher circulation of a wiki article *decreases* the likelihood it will contain misinformation, a design advantage not present in other technologies such as newspapers, radio, and most internet sites. As a volunteer editor for the Wikimedia Foundation, I am committed to ensuring that posted information is as accurate and reputable as possible by checking facts and verifying sources. As such, I expect the same of other Wikimedia Foundation contributors and also intend for the standard of expectation to carry over into University–hosted wikis.

I published video material on the Undergraduate Student Government (U.S.G.) website[3] addressing benefits of wiki technology, and I recorded individual commentary. The following is a partial transcript from one videocast entitled "Introduction to the Penn State Wiki":

> George Chriss: Student--based class descriptions benefit Penn State two--fold. The first is the ability for current students enrolled in the class to provide content descriptions for other students considering taking the same course, for those students to have a better idea of what to expect in terms choosing the best academic course for their needs. Penn State currently doesn't offer very comprehensive information on any of its 15,000--plus courses.
> The second reason student--based class descriptions are beneficial to Penn State are in providing instructors and other administrative officials with more up--to--date and comprehensive feedback than they would normally be able to receive through traditional

[3] U.S.G. Wiki Resources: http://www.clubs.psu.edu/usg/wiki

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methods such as surveys.  The idea is for Penn State to have
enough input to intelligently benefit and improve upon each
of their 15,000 courses.  Penn State still maintains control
of each of the courses, so the academic standard is kept just
as high as it always has been.  This is the area Undergraduate
Student Government is most passionate about in terms of improving
the operation of the University.
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I suggest instituting a pilot program to evaluate the effectiveness of wikis in providing student–based course descriptions, with one wiki assigned to each academic unit. Under the pilot program, faculty members would be able to volunteer their classes for participation, and any person with University affiliation would be able to edit any of the descriptions. The pilot program, if successful, should attract additional faculty members and encourage departmental participation; the program would remain manageable while being scaled into widespread usage.

I look forward to our discussion on Tuesday, and would be more than willing to elaborate on any of the areas that interest you during or after our meeting.

Respectfully,

George Chriss
Student, University Faculty Senate
Eberly College of Science
U.S.G. Academic Assembly

encl: U.S.G. Joint Resolution 36–01: Penn State Wiki

cc: Donald Leslie, Assistant V.P. and Assoc. Dean for Undergraduate Education